

Mountain Echoes

Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women



Mountain Echoes

NAMITA GOKHALE

The history of women is left to us in folklore and tradition, in faintly-remembered lullabies and the half-forgotten touch of a grandmother's hand; in recipes, ancestral jewellery, and cautionary tales about the limits of a woman's empowerment. The life of a woman is an interior life, it is spent in daily tasks, it follows the rhythm of the seasons, and, usually, it ends and passes without record.



LOTUS COLLECTION
ROLI BOOKS

ISBN: 81-7436-041-7



Lotus
Roli

Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women

As India celebrates fifty years of Independence Roli Books decided to focus on works of historical and contemporary relevance on themes that have hitherto remained neglected. These micro studies would not be confined to the scholarly community. *Mountain Echoes* is an evocative recollection of life in the Kumaon hills, through the eyes of four talented and highly individualistic women, all in or approaching their eighties. Witness to the transitions and paradigm shifts of the century, their testimony affirms the strength and vitality of Kumaoni culture and its tradition. This is a fascinating document of change and continuity, recounted with wit, humour and honesty.

Namita Gokhale, née Pant, is herself a Kumaoni by birth. Born in Lucknow in 1956, she spent her early childhood in Nainital. Her first novel, *Paro, Dreams of Passion*, was published in 1984, *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* was published in 1994, and *A Himalayan Love Story* in 1996. Namita Gokhale contributes regularly to several newspapers and magazines with a focus on women's issues and current literary criticism.

MOUNTAIN ECHOES: REMINISCENCES OF KUMAONI WOMEN

Namita Gokhale

OTHER LOTUS TITLES

IRADJ AMINI	<i>Koh-i-noor</i>
RUSKIN BOND	<i>Ruskin Bond's Green Book</i>
LALI CHATTERJEE	<i>Muonic Rhapsody and Other Encounters</i>
GIRISH CHATURVEDI	<i>Tansen</i>
NINA EPTON	<i>Mumtaz Mahal: Beloved Empress</i>
K. M. GEORGE	<i>The Best of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai</i>
MUSHIRUL HASAN	<i>India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom</i> , 2 vols.
JYOTI JAFI	<i>Nurjahan</i>
ASHISH KHOKAR	<i>Baba Allauddin Khan</i>
P. LAL	<i>The Bhagavad Gita</i>
JOHN LALL	<i>Begum Samru</i>
MAGGI LIDCHI-GRASSI	<i>The Great Golden Legend of the Mahabharata</i> , 2 vols.
MANOHAR MALGONKAR	<i>Dropping Names</i>
V. S. NARAVANE	<i>Best Stories from the Indian Classics</i>
V. S. NARAVANE	<i>Devadas and Other Stories by Sarat Chandra</i>
A. S. PAINTAL	<i>Ustad Amir Khan</i>
L. K. PANDIT	<i>Krishna Rao Shankar Pandit</i>
E. JAIWANT PAUL	<i>'By My Sword and Shield'</i>
E. JAIWANT PAUL	<i>Rani of Jhansi: Lakshmi Bai</i>
AMRITA PRITAM	<i>The Other Dimension</i>
VIBHUTI NARAIN RAI	<i>Curfew in the City</i>
GANESH SAILI	<i>Glorious Garhwal</i>
ARJAN SINGH	<i>Tiger Book</i>
DHANANAJAYA SINGH	<i>The House of Marwar</i>
KHUSHWANT SINGH	<i>Kipling's India</i>
MANJARI SINHA	<i>Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan</i>
J. C. WADHAWAN	<i>Manto Naama</i>

FORTHCOMING TITLES

MUSHIRUL HASAN	<i>Changing Profiles: Educational Institutions in India</i>
SUDHIR KAKAR	<i>Indian Love Stories</i>
C. M. NAIM	<i>Zikr-e-Mir</i>
SHOVANA NARAYAN	<i>Kathak: A Journey Through the Ages</i>
AMRITA PRITAM	<i>Fire in the Mirror</i>
LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN	<i>Medieval Seafarers</i>

Mountain Echoes:
Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women

NAMITA GOKHALE



LOTUS COLLECTION
ROLI BOOKS

Lotus Collection

© Namita Gokhale 1998

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior permission of the publisher.

This edition first published 1998

The Lotus Collection

An imprint of

Roli Books Pvt Ltd

M-75, G K II Market

New Delhi 110 048

Phones: 6442271, 6462782, 6460886

Fax: 6467185

Also at

Varanasi, Agra, Jaipur and the Netherlands

ISBN: 81-7436-040-9

Rs. 175

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9
KUMAON	15
SHIVANI	29
TARA PANDE	57
JEEYA	83
SHAKUNTALA PANDE	117

Typeset in Galliard by Roli Books Pvt Ltd and
printed at Pritha Offsets Pvt Ltd, New Delhi

First of all, Meenakshi Joshi,
without whom this book would
not have been possible. Anju
Sharma, for her patience in
transcribing and editing. Shivani
Gokhale, for her unflagging
help with transcripts, typing
and co-ordination.

*In our mountains women are rarely afraid.
They are strong, direct, loyal, and in most
situations they are free to speak their minds.
You see them roaming the forests for fodder,
strong-footed as goats, fearless as lions. They are
not afraid of the dark and they brave the cold,
sure-footedly they ford the swift mountain
streams and when they are surprised by an
attacking tiger, they have been known to raise
their scythes and give chase, to save a savaged
sister from a man-eating predator.*

*Give us this blessing
This good work we are about to begin
We have placed the eternal sounding conch-shell on the right
Below it the auspicious water jug filled with
our hopes and desires
On our shoulders the colourful scarf
on which is the multi-hued multi-petalled lotus
covering our bosom and womb
the root seed and flower of which sustain,
strengthen and please
so that the life forces that spring forth bring generations
of bright beautiful and multifarious persona.
Like Ganesh, Ram, Laxman sustained by Sita,
Urmila the quintessential woman, give us
all things auspicious
so that the name of the family lives for now
and ever and ever.*

Saguna Dehi
... Ritual song of Kumaon

INTRODUCTION

When I was invited by Roli books for a brainstorming session upon publishing ideas for a special catalogue devoted to 'Fifty years of Indian Independence,' I was struck by the highly formalised, conceptual approach most academics have towards history. I am a novelist by discipline, and for me the past is a fluid, plastic entity which is capable of being imaginatively penetrated if one doesn't try too hard. The past flows on in the present, there are rivers and eddies of perpetuity about us, time-warps and inconsistencies and even the simultaneous co-existence of time-frames, there are synapses in memory where we can see the future actually mirrored in what has already been seen and heard and done before us.

And then there was this word, 'Independence'. It's a very big word, a sorry word in many contemporary contexts. We live in an increasingly inter-dependent world, and the shallow brittle independence of the modern urban variety has ever struck me as both pathetic and vacuous. Yet this word, 'Independence' evoked, or perhaps invoked, something for me. I am by birth a Kumaoni, from the Kumaon Himalayas in Uttar Pradesh, and mountain people all over the world are by training and temperament a trifle

different from the more rational races that live closer to the heart of the earth. I grew up in the mountains, bonded by love and admiration to a band of extraordinary women, aunts and grandmothers and friends of grandmothers, who symbolised for me the ultimate in dignity and strength and integrity and sheer indestructible grit. In my upbringing, in the subliminal code I imbibed from these women, femininity never stood for weakness, and my gender was never congruent with anything but the strength, physical, emotional moral, of my sex.

In our mountains women are rarely afraid. They are strong, direct, loyal, and in most situations they are free to speak their minds. You see them roaming the forests for fodder, strong-footed as goats, fearless as lions. They are not afraid of the dark and they brave the cold, sure-footedly they ford the swift mountain streams and when they are surprised by an attacking tiger, they have been known to raise their scythes and give chase, to save a savaged sister from a man-eating predator. Of course the main body of Hinduism, Neo-Victorianism, and the general evangelising of the civilising forces have all tried, and to some extent succeeded, in putting these Amazons into purdah. Yet the spirit persists, I see it time and again in a niece's impudent smile or my ancient grandmother's legendary cussedness. These women were independent in the true sense of the word, they wrested their lives from exigency and poverty and suppression, they maintained their individuality and their identities against the most awesome odds.

It struck me that it would be both interesting and instructive to juxtapose the panorama of their lives, and the lives of their mothers and grandmothers that lingered in their living memories, against the warp and woof of formal history. It is a platitude to say that history is inhabited by real people, who lived real lives. It was not

just that I wanted to plunder their memories to script a book. The impulse that drove me, against every constraint of schedule, to give voice to the remembered past of these extraordinary women was a selfish desire to have them live on, in their own words, so that I could thus introduce them and all that they stood for to my children, and their children and the generations to come; to all those exogamous chromosomes for whom the call of the hills, of the Himalayas in particular, will remain as an insistent genetic memory.

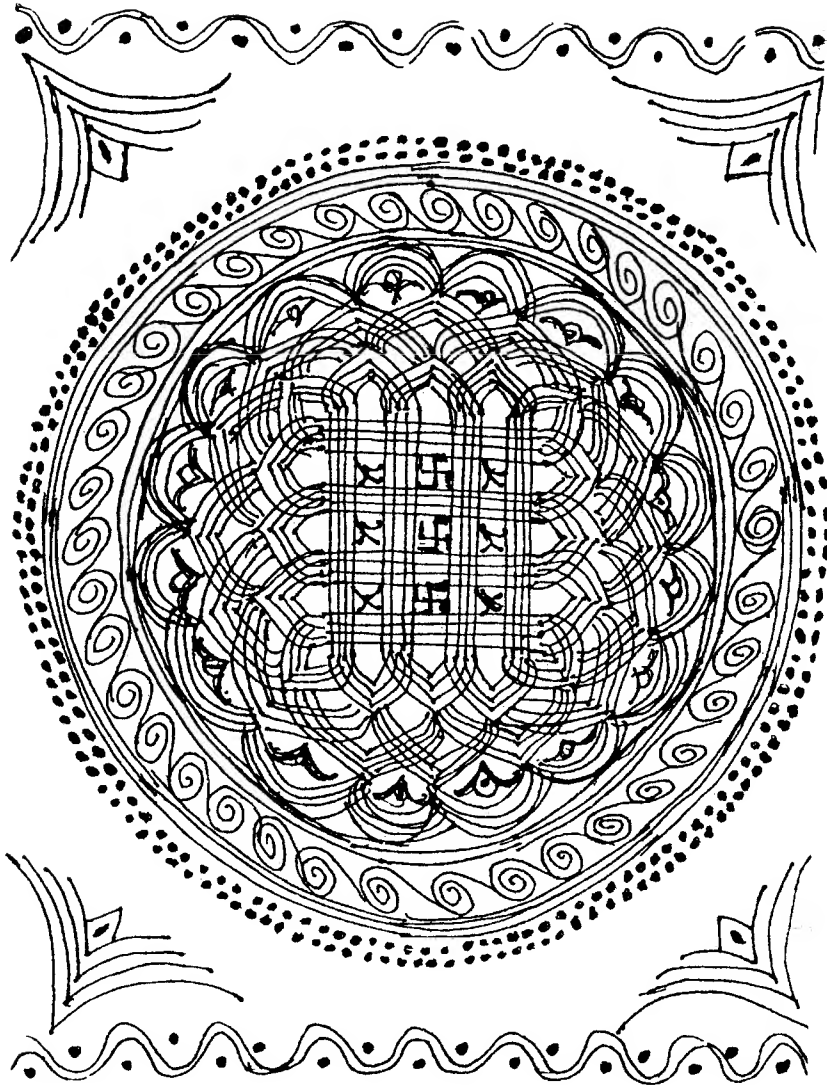
These women mirror a social universe that no longer exists, that has dissolved in the mainstream of modernisation and urbanisation, of democracy and education and emancipation. The Kumaoni Brahmins, the Pants, the Pandes and the Joshis, were a diverse group of immigrant Brahmins who settled in the hills sometime in the middle of this millennium. The Pants came from somewhere in the Konkan coast, and brought with them memories of the sea in the coconuts and conch-shells that are still an essential of ritual apparatus so many centuries and generations later. The Pandes were Pandas or Pandits from Kanauj, and the Joshis were Jyotishis or astrologers, supposedly from Rajasthan. This diaspora of high-thinking Brahmins all migrated, for one reason or another, from bastions of privilege and prejudice to the Dev-Bhoomi, the Land of the Gods that was Uttarakhand. This holy land, beloved of pilgrims and sanyasis, had not completely surrendered to the onslaught of rigid Hindu theocracy. It shared a border with Tibet, it was on the silk route from China. It fostered a simultaneity of religious traditions, of joyous almost pagan animism coexistent with severe Tantric ritual, of the Namboodiris who were the Adi Shankaracharya's legacy, of the Buddhism that still thrived in nearby Nepal, just across the Kali river.

These immigrants, my forefathers, came to the mountains pre-equipped with the burdens of patriarchy and orthodox Hinduism, of the laws of Manu superimposed by feudalism and the revisionism of a reactionary society in turn re-adjusting to the further orthodoxy of Muslim thought. In the Himalayas, in the kingdoms of the Chand Rajas, a surprising heterodoxy and freedom of thought flourished in the rarefied mountain air. To some extent this liberality of thought and cross-pollination of ideologies was but natural in what was after all the premier spot of pilgrimage for mainland India. But to my novelist's mind, my over-imaginative fictionalising mind, some part of this vitality and independence of thought belongs to the intrinsic nature of the people of the mountains, of the native Khasiyas, supposedly descended from Scythians and Kushans, of the Huns and Mongols from across the border, and their peculiar pride and fierce sense of freedom. My ancestors, those traditionalists, those fierce patriarchs, those sons and scions of Manu, became courtiers and astrologers and royal advisers in the prosperous Himalayan kingdoms, and ignored all assaults upon their core-beliefs and ideology. They were barricaded by the inner mountains of the mind; they were smug and secure in the conditionalities of caste and varna. But their women, their wives and mothers and sisters, breathed the fresh mountain air, felt the soil, knew the earth, in the way women do. They imbibed the rugged common sense, the sturdy strength, of the native genius of their adopted land. The Shakta tradition that flourished in the hills, the worship of the mother, the veneration of the feminine principle, strengthened them and invisibly made them the stronger.

The four women in this book have a lot in common with each other. They are all Thuldhoti Brahmins, they

have all enjoyed an uncommon degree of education for their times. They were all born in the second decade of this century. Brought up in a bewildering web of caste restrictions, they all witnessed the sweep of events that encompassed the abolition of the begari system in the hills, Gandhi's call for independence, freedom at midnight, and India's subsequent aborted tryst with destiny. Now in their late seventies or early eighties, they have in their lives traversed a shift of centuries.

These conversations were recorded by Ms Meenakshi Joshi, scholar and pedant extraordinaire, also known to her friends as Encyclopedia Kumaonica. She has a wide-ranging theoretical and practical knowledge of Kumaoni thought and culture, and also possesses tremendous reserves of empathy and patience which she had to draw upon in full measure in the course of this tiring, and sometimes painful, journey into the past.



KUMAON

History is the process of reclaiming one's past, of understanding it in the light of the present.

The history of men is however distinct from the history of women. The history of men is recorded in wars won and lost, in the reigns of kings, in edicts and inscriptions, in ruined fortresses and other such grand and exterior things. The history of women is left to us in folklore and tradition, in faintly-remembered lullabies and the half-forgotten touch of a grandmother's hand; in recipes, ancestral jewellery, and cautionary tales about the limits of a woman's empowerment. The life of a woman is an interior life, it is spent in daily tasks, it follows the rhythm of the seasons, and, usually, it ends and passes without record.

The conventional history of Kumaon is a long and varied one. The word 'Kumaon' is a corruption of 'Kurmanchal', the land of Kurmavata, the ninth incarnation of Vishnu in the form of a tortoise. Kurmanchal was the Pauranic name of this region. In the Vedas the North Central part of the Himalayas is referred to as Meru. In the Ramayana it is known as Uttarkoshal. In the Mahabharata the region was included in the Kingdom of Uttarkuru.

Prehistoric dwellings such as rock shelters have been discovered in Lakhudiyar near Barechhina in Almora District. Stone-age implements have been found in both Almora and Nainital districts.

A succession of peoples were drawn from the plains to settle in the salubrious environs of Kumaon. The Kol tribals are supposed to have migrated to the mountains after their defeat by the Dravidians. The Shilpkars—the caste artisans and craftsmen of Kumaon—are said to be the descendents of this community. The second wave of migrants were the Kirats, the ancestors of the tribes today known as Shaukas, Tharu, Boksas, and the legendary Banrajis of the Himalayan forests. Subsequently, the Khasas came from West Asia and settled in these parts, as did the Indo-Scythians. A major part of the population of Kumaon is said to have descended from these Khasas.

The Kunindas were the first rulers of Kumaon. They appear to have been dominant in the region from about 500 BC to AD 600. Excavated coins and other such archaeological evidence of material life indicate that they were a prosperous pastoral community. They appear to have worshipped Shiva and made Vedic sacrifices. The Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang visited the mountains of Kurmanchal sometime in the period 633 to 643 AD. He records his impressions of the tribal kingdoms of the Shaakas, Khasas, Maagas, Kinners and Huns. In the course of his travels to Brahmpur, widely identified in that period with Kurmanchal, he makes mention of a 'Stri Rajya', a Kingdom ruled by women. However, there is scant historical verification of this, and it is entirely possible that he was referring to the polyandrical societies of Himachal Pradesh.

Gradually the Kunindas ceded power to the Katyuris, who ruled over Uttarakhand from the seventh to the

eleventh centuries. The solar dynasty of the Katyuris, who claimed their lineage from the Sun-God, contributed much to the history of medieval Kumaon. At the zenith of their power they held a part of what is now western Nepal, the whole of Garhwal-Kumaon, parts of eastern Himachal Pradesh and tracts of the Terai-Bhabhar region. The history of the Katyuris is well-documented through copper-plate inscriptions. It is an insight into the nature of their society that the names of their queens are everywhere mentioned as equal consorts of the kings. Much of the architectural heritage of Kumaon is a testament to the highly-developed aesthetics of the Katyuris. Masons, craftsmen and sculptors were brought to the mountains from the plains to build temples dedicated to a diverse array of gods and goddesses. There were temples to Vishnu, Surya, Garuda, Ganesha, Shakti, Kali, and of course Lord Shiva, the dominant deity of the mountains.

After the predatory attacks of the Malla dynasty in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, again vividly documented in local folklore, the prolific Chand dynasty established their long sovereignty over Kumaon. While the Katyuris had claimed descent from the Sun-God, the Chands were a lunar dynasty, as their name implied. Just as the Katyuris had found expression in stone, the artistic sensibility of the Chand Rajas flowered in the ornate wood-craft of the period, some of which survives, in the original and as part of the living tradition of local architecture. This period saw the emergence of a distinct Kumaoni style in terms of language and literature, as well as the fusion of the many layers and aspects of local custom into common identity.

In 1790, the Gurkhas invaded Kumaon, and the last of the Chand Kings, Raja Mahendra Chand, was murdered. The rule of the Gurkhas, locally known as 'Gorkhyol', was

ruthless and brutal. Stories abound of terror and oppression, and the countryside was ravaged by rape and plunder. As the over-reaching Gurkhali war-lords moved down the mountains towards the Terai and the plains of Northern India, they came into direct conflict with the established might of the British Empire. War was declared in 1814, and Generals Gillespie, Ochterlory, Wood and Marley led an intense campaign against the Nepali General Amar Singh. The terms of the treaty, which was signed at Sagauli, in North Bihar, set the boundaries of modern Nepal. Shimla, Garhwal, Kumaon and the Terai were surrendered to the British. The next cycle in the history of Kumaon had begun.

The British had a long and perfidious love affair with Kumaon. The weather and the landscape reminded them of home, and the exigencies of the isolated terrain directed that a humane attitude was to be adopted in the matter of local administration. The mountain kingdoms had so far maintained a proud insularity from the plains, they had been a retreat, a refuge, a sacred place of pilgrimage. The hill-stations changed all that, and the holy mountains of the Vedas became tourist destinations.

The region stabilised. Roads were built, trade flourished, schools and colleges were set up, a competent administration maintained law and order. The Kumaonis are a loyal people, and they bore the new rulers little malice. Lord Ramsay passed into folk history as one of the local heroes of Kumaon. A strong vernacular press was established. The *Almora Akhbar* was established in the 1880's. It was one of the first and most successful of Hindi newspapers. *Shakti*, a national magazine, was established in 1818.

In 1916 the *Kumaon Parishad* was established. It gave voice to a dynamic movement for the abolition of the

oppressive 'Begar' system, and for the restoration of the natural forest rights of the local people. As in the rest of India, nationalist feeling ignited the imagination of the people of Kumaon. The Kumaonis are a martial race, and the Second World War had its impact in these remote mountains, for large numbers of the local populace had been recruited into the British army. 1947 brought Independence. The catchwords of progress and development were gradually betrayed by the administrative inertia of Uttar Pradesh.

The nineteen-eighties saw the resurgence of the Uttarakhandi identity. Sundarlal Bahuguna's call for the restoration of the natural ecology of the region, and the spontaneous and unprecedented responses it generated from the women of the area, heralded the change in thinking that was to culminate in the demand for a separate hill state.

This is the exterior history of Kumaon—the history of men and matters and affairs of state, of plates and pillars and edicts. Apart from the rulers and administrators and plunderers, and the waves of migrants and settlers from the plains, Uttarakhand has played host to centuries of ascetics and mendicants as they traversed the Kailash-Manasarovar and Kedar-Badrinath pilgrim routes. The smritis of Vashishta, Vyas and Bharadwaj were revealed here. The trade routes to Tibet further stimulated cultural and spiritual interflows. Before Shankaracharya's intervention, Buddhism flourished in this area, and in fact travelled to Tibet via the salt-routes. There are significant Buddhist sites of archeological interest extant in Senapani-Byandhura.

The middle ages saw an influx of high-caste migrants into Kumaon from Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Bengal, Kanyakubj, and Kurukshetra. After the

British came to the hills, the region attracted artistes and scholars from all over Europe, many of whom actually settled down and became one with the local ethos. Swami Vivekanand spent some time in Almora, and Mahatma Gandhi was enchanted by the beauty of Kausani, where he established an ashram. Uday Shankar set up a dance company in Almora, and many contemporary poets and writers have found sustenance for their creativity in the mountains of Kumaon. This synthesis of influences led to a rich intellectual matrix which is reflected in the everyday culture of the region.

The daily life of Kumaon is what this book is really about. It attempts to reflect the deepest and most intimate convolutions of a culture and society in rapid transition through the remembered history of four women, all of them exceptional for their intelligence, education and exposure to events. Daily life comprises the struggle with mortality, the concerns for food, clothing and nurture, which constitute the real life of women; a life that is lived close to the skin and the breath and the cries of new-born babies. It may at first view appear a humdrum and unexceptional vantage point, but upon examination it yields a significant understanding of the history and sociology of Uttarakhand, of the compulsions of its identity.

A woman's life is attenuated to the household, to the rhythm of the life-cycle of successive generations. It is woven into the fabric of the society around her. It reflects the religion, music, festivals and traditions of the region. The religious life of Uttarakhand has a patina of Sanskritisation, of mantras and Brahmanical ritual, imported from the successive waves of settlers from the plains. While accepting and integrating this body of thought, the spirit and soul of Uttarakhand remained in some ways strangely animistic. The High religion of Adi Shankaracharya and

his followers remained the elite domain of the pilgrims and philosophers and priestly classes. For the rest, the immediate spirituality of their surroundings, the intense energies and magnetic presence of the mountains themselves, led to the development of a highly localised pantheon of gods, an assertion of the genius loci, as it were. Apart from the omnipresent worship of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati, who are after all residents of the area, headquartered as it were in Mount Kailash, each village has a Bhumi-devta, a god of the soil. Temples also abound dedicated to Kul-devtas, Gram-devtas, Naga-devtas, and Veers or folk-heroes who have been incorporated into divinity. Bholanath, Kailsnath, Gangbisht and Haru are some of the local folk-heroes elevated to God-head through song and ballad. Superstitions and tantric ritual abound in Uttarakhand. The remnants of Tibetan tantric practices still continue in the esoteric and religious practices of the region.

The other dominant thread in religious thought is the Shakta influence. The goddesses of Kumaon are not the docile Sitas and Satis of the Northern plains, but fiercely individualistic, 'Ugra' manifestations of pure energy. The temple of Naina Devi in Nainital is supposed to be the geographical spot where the eyes of Sati fell to the earth. Garh Devis, again extremely localised in their worship, are invoked in cremation grounds on moonless Amavasya nights. Anjari and Ujyari are ritualised manifestations of the cycle of night and day. The Dayans or local witches with their feet pointed backwards, are supposedly inversion of the ancient religion of the cult of Diana, which came to these parts with the Himalayan sojourns of the Greek and the Yavanas.

In fact the Goddesses Nanda Devi and Naina Devi have even been interpreted as demotic manifestations of th

Greek Goddess Nana, who was incorporated into a Kumaoni divinity with the Kushan kings and the Indo-Greek diaspora. Nanda and Sunanda are two popular heroines of the Chand dynasty, again elevated to divinity by the power and thrust of folklore. Vanini Devi and Shyama Devi were like guardian spirits to old Almora. Shitala Devi is the propitiation of the dreaded scourge of small pox. Manila Devi and Dronagiri Devi are again place-goddesses, tutelary spirits of their area. Kali in all her manifestations—Mahakali, Bhadrakali, Shamsankali—is present through the length and breadth of Uttarakhand. In fact, every river, mountain, peak, cave and waterfall is said to bear the imprint of its special tutelary god, sage or demon.

There is the story of the temple of Goddess Kalika or Mahakali situated in a pine-forest to the east of Gangolihaat. Supposedly, whosoever heard the voice of the Goddess died. Obviously she was, in the way of women, a powerful and vocal Goddess, and the local populace began migrating in large numbers. When the Adi Shankaracharya came to these mountains sometime in the early part of the eighth century, drumming out Buddhism and local practice with his 'Digvijay', he conducted some ritual prayers and symbolically sealed the Goddess with a large stone slab. The call of the Goddess was silenced, and the 'civilising' mission of High Brahminism succeeded. The story of course continues to speak for itself. This, incidentally, is also the land specifically sacred to the Goddess Mahishasurmardini, slayer of the demons Mahishasur, Chandmund and Raktvirya.

Fairs and festivals are very important in Kumaon, and many of these Shaktis and goddesses have fairs held specifically in their honour. The festival of Naina Devi is celebrated in Nainital, and fairs dedicated to Nanda Devi

are held in Almora, Nainital, Ranikhet, Bhowali and Danpur. Rural fairs are also held to honour Varahi Devi, Jwala Devi and the Goddess Sharda. Nanda is the Ran-Chandi, the Battle-Goddess of Kumaon. Buffaloes and goats are slaughtered in her worship.

The daily lives of Kumaoni women are crowded with a never-ending succession of festivals, most of them involving fasts and the preparation of special foods. Many Kumaoni festivals involve the ritual sowing of 'Harela', the green grain of wheat barley and grass. The new year begins with the 'Samvatsar Pratipada', followed by nine days of worship of the Goddess Durga. Navratri Puja is also held in Ganga Dusshehra, when three 'shlokas' invoking the sages Agastya and Palastya are posted outside each home as a form of benediction. Almost every 'Purnima' (full moon), Chaturdashi (14th day of the lunar calendar) and Amavasya (moonless night) involve special prayers and fasting: Baisakhi Purnima, Shravan Purnima, Narsimha Chaturdashi, Vat Savitri Amavasya, Sankasht Chaturthi, Ganesh Sankasht Chaturthi—the list is endless. These are festivals brought in from all the diverse places of origin of the Kumaoni Brahmins, and consolidated through practice and intermarriage. Then there is the Chaturmasya, four months of fasting which commences from the onset of the monsoon. On Vat Savitri Amavasya chaste women fast for their husbands. The Hartali fast is again undertaken for the husband's well-being. Uma Maheshwer is worshipped on Amukta Bharan Saptami. Doorvashtami, Kojagar, Shivratri, Sankranti, all involve ritual and fasting. In the month of Pausa, all Sundays have to be observed as Vrata, to be spent in fasting. The Vrata of Lord Shiva is observed on Mondays, especially in the month of Shravan, Magh and Vaisakh. All Tuesdays are fasting-days, to honour Mangal.

The birth ceremonies include Garbhadan (conception), Namkarma (naming ceremony), Annaprashan (initiation into food), Chuda Karma (ritual tonsure) and Upnayan (sacred thread ceremony). All birth, baptism, sacred thread and marriage ceremonies involve elaborate and time consuming 'samskaras'. Death is the most important passage, and the shradhas of departed ancestors are held every year. Traditionally the lives of Kumaoni women were bound and circumscribed by the restrictions of fasting and ritual, and by the Brahminical injunctions against the consumption of all food not prepared by suitable Brahmins adhering to a strict code of prescribed practice. That they managed to lead fulfilled and busy lives against this scenario of contrary injunctions speaks for their strength and flexibility.

The folk art of Kumaon is intimately bound with the religious life of its women. The 'Aipan' or Alpna is the most widespread form of folk-art in the hills. Delicately painted geometric designs are spread upon a back-drop of auspiciously-coloured ochre. These folk motifs decorate all available surfaces—doors, windows, walls, floors, ledges. Incorporating the ancient tantric symbols of the traditional mandalas, these 'aipans' and peeths are specific to different festivals and rituals. The symbols of Shakti, the female principle, swastikas, the sun, the moon, bells, conch-shells, the feet of the Goddess Lakshmi, all find their way into this transient tapestry which typifies all Kumaoni prayer and festivity. Some of these same motifs are repeated in the 'Pichauras', which are the traditional wedding-scarves of Kumaoni women. Also known as a rangwala or Kusumia, it is printed with vegetable dyes in shades of yellow and vermillion. The design consists of a swastika at the centre, with representations of the sun, moon, bell and conch-shell surrounding it. For many of the festivals,

the women also sculpt 'dikaras' or clay idols of the gods and goddesses at home, using locally available material like mud, straw and lentils.

The folk songs of the hills, the 'Muktaks', similarly reflect the true fabric of local Kumaoni life. The oral literature of the hills has largely survived within the repository of the musical tradition. The old pastoral, agricultural songs, the Hurkiya Bols, are sung during the sowing of the paddy, a delicate task involving skill and dexterity, traditionally undertaken by women. The major life-samskaras, such as childbirth, marriage, thread-ceremony, all begin with formal invocations to the various divinities to join and partake of the festivities. These songs, called 'Shakun Akhara' carry within them the essential Kumaoni world-view, one of a society integrated with its environment.

The 'Nyoli' or 'Ritu Rain' songs are symbolic of the natural and seasonal cycles. The Jhora, Jhora Chappeli and Chhanchhari songs are accompanied by appropriate dances. The purdah system of the North Indian plains permeated the hills only marginally, with some caste Brahmins. In a less inhibited society, the folk dances involved the whole village community. The 'Jhoras' are duets, often sung by men and women together. 'Chhanchari' also known as 'Khel', has a lead singer surrounded by a circle which sings the chorus, and dances to a slow and measured tread. The musical tradition of Kumaon comes dynamically alive in the month of Chaitra, when the entire community congregates at special gatherings at homes and temples and public venues to celebrate the onset of spring, where the 'Khari Holi' is sung.

Perhaps the most arcane and distinct of Kumaoni folk traditions is that of the 'Jagars'. Jagars are sung in near-shamanistic rituals of possession, invoking local gods and

deities. The various layers of historical and cultural tradition coalesce in the mystic and multi-dimensional experience of the Jagars. The local ballads such as 'Rajula Malushahi' 'Ajua Bafaul', 'Sangram Singh Karki', are usually romantic and patriotic in the extreme, extolling the love of the Kumaoni homeland and its beautiful women. Revived and rewoven into the mainstream by the late Mohan Upreti and the Parvatiya Kal Kendra, they are popular even today throughout Kumaon and its diaspora.

Many of these ballads and folk-dramas are about the strong and individualistic mountain-women who are the cultural icons of Kumaon. There is also an abundance of folk-tales about these hardy and obstinate women, who have clung to the old way of life, and kept things going, often in the absence of their fathers, brothers and husbands. The women eulogised in these traditions are always fiercely strong, with an intense sense of loyalty to the family, clan and community.

Paharis are partial to superstition, and there is an abundance of stories in circulation about local tantrics and sorcerers, of which the following, excerpted from *Atkinson's Gazetteer*, has always struck me as being of abiding relevance:

Shri Ballabh Pande was a Rajguru adept in Tantra-shastra. He lived in Satrali Jagir, where there was a constant paucity of water. His wife had to walk great distances to get the water for his ritual worship. One day, being very tired, his wife carried the water pot over her head, rather than in her arms as she had been instructed. Shri Ballabh Pande reprimanded her, saying that the water was now polluted and of no use for his prayers. His enraged wife began taunting him, saying that if he was such a great sorcerer and tantric he

could surely carry the water himself or carry it to the desired spot by magical means. The Rajguru pulled out a tuft of Kusha grass, and water began gushing out. He replaced the grass, and his chastened wife never complained about carrying the water for his rituals again.

The moral of the story appears rather ambivalent to me. If the Rajguru could indeed quite easily access the water, why did he depend upon his wife, and expect her to wear herself out to carry it for him? It seems a strangely familiar story, which fits many contexts in both historical and contemporary Kumaon. Modern Uttarakhand survives only because of its women. Over the course of the last century the region was reduced to a money-order economy. Heavy recruitments into the British and Indian armies, and an exodus towards the plains in search of a livelihood, led to a demographic imbalance whereby it was left to the women to maintain the agricultural lands and care for the old and the young left behind in the villages. Uttarakhand is a highly literate region, and the reservation policies prevalent all over India made it difficult for the cream of its educated youth to find direction and employment. The multiple consequences of a tourism-based economy, with its concomitant commercialisation of values, are already coming home to roost. Ideas and issues fester, yet the business of daily life, of cutting wood and drawing water, remains the duty and domain of women, who continue, stoic as always, with the daily itinerary of their lives. This book is dedicated to the unsung heroines of the hills, to their stubborn courage and indomitable will.



SHIVANI

Gaura Pant, better known to her readers by her pen-name 'Shivani', is a gracious and cerebral lady who retains the rapier wit of her younger days. Her eyes shine and sparkle as she talks, the words come alive and take on a life of their own.

In all humility, I am putting down some of my life experiences so that people who read them can gain an understanding of my life and times. Recently, when I fell seriously ill many of my fans requested me to write about myself—an intimate story, no holds barred, so that they could learn to live as fulfilled a life as mine. It is easy to say this, but can anyone really be so truthful that they can lay bare everything? I do not think so. Certain iron doors are locked forever. It's no secret that I have always resisted and fought against empty rituals and outdated antiquated customs. However, I do not want to start any new controversies at this late stage in my life. There have been too many painful experiences, many of which hurt even after so many years. My honesty has always cost me dear. Because of my frankness, my desire to observe and

articulate, there have been many friends who have suddenly changed towards me; their behaviour and attitudes have hurt me immensely. It is far better to forget the past rather than scratch those wounds afresh. As a woman, a daughter, wife, and mother I have examined all the aspects of feminine nature, its strengths, its weaknesses, its occasional pettiness. I am always amazed by the anger and vindictiveness that lies latent in human nature especially in women.

Many years ago, when I was still a young woman, an astrologer who saw my hand told me, 'one day you will be a Rajmata, wielding royal strength. Your left hand has an extraordinary line, which will give you a reign over minds, but accompanied by many pin-pricks and much unhappiness too.' At that time, I laughed the matter away. However, over the years I began putting all ill luck down to that configuration of lines on my left hand. Today, when I look back, I have earned a lot of respect in the Hindi speaking world for my writings. I am very proud of my achievements which entirely are my very own. The astrologer was not entirely wrong.

But I am perturbed about the rapid speed at which we are losing our independence of mind and thought to the new culture, the new thoughts, the new society which is totally borrowed from the West. Sometimes I feel that one day when inevitably, we have to pay for this betrayal, we might just become culturally bankrupt. Bereft of our ideas and identity we might cease to exist as Indians. This mindless Westernisation will have attained nothing in our account when the final reckoning takes place. Then just the way we have forgotten to nurture and sustain our mother-tongue, we may similarly soon forget our own mothers! The haste with which we are abandoning our heritage alarms me.

I shudder to think of the day, not far away, when even the death of one's own parents might fail to stir any feelings. As sanskaras are forgotten and abandoned, soon sons will forget to shave their heads as a symbol of their sorrow. I am perturbed by the pervasiveness of the by-mom and bye-dad culture for ultimately this may well become our way of sending off the dead, of forsaking our past. Those of us who comprehend the implications of this rapid change in society are naturally perturbed. We grew up in the togetherness of a joint family, where we shared our simple joys and sorrows with a great many people. Whatever the consequences, we persisted in our duties to our parents, siblings, husband and children. We were earnest about improving ourselves and our circumstances all the time. We showed veneration to the old, compassion to the sick, love and protection to the young. We also passed on these values to our children by giving them a code of conduct to live by. We constantly questioned them, taught them to consider and introspect upon their actions and only when their answers satisfied us did we let them proceed.

Of course in this sort of life frivolous things like any kind of external show played hardly any part. It was one's mind, training and scholarship that made one win or lose. We shared our clothes and books, the older generation passing them on to the young. We were never loaded with a ten kilo satchel on our backs but our conscience carried much weight.

Of course, change is a fact of life. It is the law of nature that that which was past can never be present and what is today cannot be tomorrow. But the world has not changed for the better, not at least in our country for which we cherished such great hopes. People do not realise how much we have lost out in this process of

change. After all there are some lasting values which have to withstand the test of time. Each generation has to analyse them and then accept them. Nowadays this perspective to do so is somehow lacking.

My childhood was spent in the princely states. Contrary to the popular view, I can declare with certainty that not everything was bad or unfair in those times. Even in the midst of great pomp, even in the glitter and show of feudal life, the element of vulgarity was missing. There was a sense of detachment always present in all the ceremonies. Not all the scions of the princely families were villains, as it is portrayed now in the popular press. Perhaps they were far more conscious of their responsibilities to their subjects than most modern politicians. They had the fear of God in them, as the estates were supposed to be entrusted to them and they were aware that they were ruling on behalf of the gods. In a way this ensured a sense of moral integrity and righteous behaviour. Apart from a few black sheep, they took their responsibility seriously with regard to education. They gave encouragement to art, music and culture; they promoted religious tolerance and the emancipation of women. The respect for the teacher, the patronage to intellectuals, poets, musicians, singers and dancers is missing now. As someone said—those who refuse to learn from history are condemned to repeat it.

My father was a tutor to Ala Khachar. Even after my father's death, he continued to send a grant to my mother until she died; Orchha Maharaj, Bir Singh Deoju very lovingly gave us shelter when my father suddenly died in far off Bangalore. He later employed my brother as his private secretary and himself gave me away in marriage with all the graces attendant at the marriage of a princess. Maybe that is why even now I think of Bundelkhand as

my mother's home. It was this large-heartedness which characterised the age. Today one encounters so much constant greed and pettiness. Today's society imparts totally opportunistic values, which leave you to the wolves of market forces when you have been bled white.

Kumaon's past is replete with a rich and colourful history. It is reported that when the kind of Garud took his 'Nazrana' to the Mughal Court at Delhi the courtiers were truly dazzled by the caparisoned horses, the gems, the carpets and bricks of gold offered by the king. Although the Mughals were already eyeing the wealth of Uttarakhand, yet the king of Kumaon had the temerity to shelter Dara Shikoh and Shuja in defiance of the Mughal court. This independence of thought is what has always characterised Kumaoni culture. Prosperity never interfered with integrity. There was a lot of gold panning in those days. The rest of India was always greedy for the wealth of Kumaon. But the period of Gurkha rule, broke the spirit of Kumaon. It also perpetuated a kind of terror psychosis that caused woman to recede into the background. Their natural independence was curbed for they now had to be protected against the barbarities of Gurkha rule. This was the historical reason why attitudes changed, and their situation changed into a subsidiary one. A certain backwardness was thus visited upon them. Some customs and rituals became really oppressive especially child marriage with the connected travails of early widowhood. This was a sad corollary to the war's men waged.

My father's sister became a widow a few months after her wedding. She was just twelve years old. This is the story she once told me:

I used to see all the women eating paan, and I loved seeing their red lips. I desired to wear glass bangles

and a red tikka on my forehead, so one day when I was all alone I mixed sindoor with water and dyed my lips. I was about to look at myself in the mirror when my mother came back. Oh my! She hit me and beat me and said so many sad and unpleasant things. Well she was right it was a question of the honour of the family.

Many years ago, when my aunt first narrated the above incident she began crying. We offered her a paan but she refused, saying that she was now thirty and finally understood her place in the scheme of things. Ways of thinking were so very rigid. In the absence of money, I suppose the people of Kumaon became obsessed with honour and valour. The 'Karm kanda' or the body of ritual observances became all important in society.

There was another aunt whose husband was absolutely insane. Sometimes he would beat her like a drum till she was half dead, sometimes he would carry her in this condition to our doorstep, near the roadside—and leave her for dead. My mother would then tend her back to health. When she had recovered my mother would beg her not to go back to this sort of a man. She would ever threaten her, saying that she would not help her in the future. But as soon as my aunt recovered she would jump the rear wall-back to her living hell. After all, pain is also a form of bondage.

Those days custom demanded that one never went visiting empty-handed. People lived on remote hill tops and so when one went visiting it was considered appropriate to carry some sort of foodstuff—it could be spun sugar sweets or laddoos or something like that so as not to embarrass the hostess lest she was unprepared for her visitors.

In our house the women were constantly reprimanded if they were ungraceful in their demeanour. To laugh aloud or to stomp one's feet while walking on wooden flooring was decidedly bad manners. Even much later when I took my youngest daughter Irra to meet my mother—she put a towel on her head and made her practice a demure walk with her shoulders bent forward. She lectured her upon appropriate feminine posture. It was desirable to keep the spine straight but to let the shoulders sag a bit. This was how I always saw my mother deport herself.

I feel nostalgic for those days, for the long winters when we sat huddled indoors by the 'saggar' fire. We had been warned not to go out after sunset, when fairies and wood satyrs and all descriptions of female ghosts were supposed to enter nubile young girls and take possession of their bodies and spirit. Towards the evening a servant would put a whole oak stump into the 'Saggar' or iron grate. When it was aglow with fire it was put in the centre of the main room. This was our 'desi' form of central heating, not only was the main room almost unbearably warm, but all the rooms which shared common walls remained heated through the night so that one could sleep without freezing over.

At the side of this saggar a sauce pan with milk was kept with a piece of jaggery in it, which was shared by the whole family—I have never tasted anything better, not even Swiss chocolates. After a quick dinner, early in the evening our family sat around this saggar and Lohaniji our old family retainer entertained us with scary tales—like the one about the rich man's son in Verawar whose wedding procession of boats came in upon every full-moon night even though they had all drowned fifty years ago. He would tell us about the impossible encounters

he had had with witches and ghosts and spectres. He made these talks so interesting—interspersed with real people whom we had heard of—that our fear was mingled with an insatiable curiosity.

Once he encountered the *baraat* or wedding procession of a family of ghosts. He described in great detail how these 'bhoots' were seen flying across the hills and dales. Lohaniji on a full moon night saw them when they sat down to breakfast with purees as large as elephants ears 'Did you taste them?' we would enquire. 'Am I a fool that I would eat with ghosts and demons?' he would reply. It's true that they begged me to join them. 'Please eat with us and bless our food, dear Brahmin' they had pleaded. But I was firm. 'Go away, you dead bodies' I told them, Do you think a Santrali Brahmin like me would eat food cooked by corpses? Then I ran for my life. Behind me I could hear a sweet female voice. It said 'Wait, wait! Please take me with you'—Oh! Dear children, I ran and ran and ran! When I finally reached home I slept for three days.'

We used to get into bed after a daily surfeit of such stories. We would shudder with a delicious sense of fear, and we would stick to each other through the night and never venture out from the safety of the quilt. Sometimes I feel that those childhood stories which Lohaniji told us were so utterly fascinating that they stirred my already vivid and fertile imagination and gave me the power to see beyond the realities of mundane day to day life. This became my vocation—I too became a storyteller, although unlike Lohaniji I used my pen rather than my vocal chords.

The whole household was fond of telling and listening to stories. They would all recount weird episodes in their own inimitable styles. But the queen of raconteurs was

my mother. When she sat down to tell a story the ladies from all the adjoining houses would also gather around her to listen. She had a lot of Gujarati literature and had a repertoire of stories from that remote land. She was a born story teller and could switch effortlessly from Gujarati dialogues to the pure, and gracious Avadhi of Lucknow and then over the Kumaoni in no time. It was as though Goddess Saraswati herself had blessed her tongue. One of the Gujarati stories 'The Theft of the Earrings' is still fresh in my mind. That remains my test of a good story—howsoever many times it is told the impact is fresh each time.

Another story she told us 'Agre Kini Bhavishyati' has also remained imbedded in my mind. My mother was also very good at telling us about her own experiences. She could tell the most inconsequential story with such involvement that the humour and pathos came alive. She never ever failed to move us, sometimes to laughter, sometimes tears. She told about the time she had seen a performance of the 'Birth of Krishna' raas of Maharaj Bindadin. For the sake of realism the danseuse had tied a pumpkin around her stomach to depict the pregnant Yashoda. My mother was present when the pumpkin fell free of her and broke upon the stage. We simply loved hearing these stories.

She watched these performances with the royal families of Central India, where my father was a tutor attached to the court. We would listen wide-eyed to these stories of royal celebrations, where birth ceremonies and marriages were marked by the presence of all the talented artistes of the land. She would tell us how, so and so had been called from Calcutta, how the prince had parted with a priceless string of pearls in appreciation of a smile or a song.

She told us about her memories, Siaheswari Devi, Jadden Bai, Dulari Bai and all the other premier singers of those times. She would tell us of the thumri singers with their fabulous costumes and elaborate make up. She told us of Kajjan Bai who used such powerful 'attar' that when she once lightly touched my mother's earlobe the perfume lingered there for months; 'you can smell it even now' she would tell us in a convincing whisper. Such was her spell that all of us would bend down to smell her earlobe.

Then she would swiftly bring us down to earth by showing us our way to bed. For hours I would dream on those fantastic tales. Looking out of my window I could see the Shaidevi Hills covered with white translucent snow in the magic of the night. The tall deodars or the thick Himalayan oaks were a standing witness to the story of humankind—sometimes the sound of a flute would flow in from afar adding to the enchantment.

These were moments of great happiness. The beauty of our hills was shared equally by the rich and the poor. Sometimes, I feel that the lonely children of today living in nuclear families hardly get to know the deep pleasures of togetherness and sharing. They want packaged beauty in search of which they will gladly spend a pretty sum and go to Switzerland. Such joys are of course only for the rich. The poor have lost everything—even beauty is denied to them now. They are wallowing in poverty, filth, dirt and a kind of aesthetic vacuum—I feel it was not so bad then.

Of course the discipline at home has changed too and every dictum seems to be standing on its own head. Whereas the children of my times pleaded with their parents and elders now it is now the parents who are heard pleading with their children. The roles have been

reversed. Nowadays parental guidance is minimal too. Have the parents failed the children? Can a father ask his teenage son what time he will return home? Sometimes this fast directionless life results in great tragedies. Do today's children realise what they put their parents through? This new lifestyle has brought untold miseries to many elderly people—do the younger generation even care? Have their individual rights obliterated their sense of duty? Does this generation realise what it has lost?

Perhaps our generation was not as pampered as today's, but then we were not so cynical either. There was so much enthusiasm, we were so happy when we achieved something. We looked forward to simple joys like festivals and ceremonies. Even if we had just jaggery and cereals to celebrate them, in those frugal feasts when we sat together and ate a family meal. Now the consumer culture and the cult of wealth has spread its poison all around. There is so much crass and meaningless show all around, I wonder if there is a corresponding rise in actual happiness.

Spun, sugar sweets, popped rice and clay toys brought a gleam to one's eye, during Diwali. At night the stars came down to earth with the flickering lamps that dotted the hillsides. We would stand at our front door and watch the displays of fireworks, which were few and far between. Diwali was never noisy; you could even hear the wind, whispering in the trees.

During Holi, the one-lane Almora bazaar used to be redolent with the smell of ghee-fried sweets, gujia, Baal mithai and singaras which is a special sweetmeat made with thickened milk, coconut, and cardamoms wrapped in maloo leaves. Joga Shah sat in his shop frying mouth watering 'gujias' they were so enormous that calling them

mere 'gujias' would be to insult them. Joga Shah's love for books was legendary. He had a large library in his house and we were privileged in being allowed to borrow books from him. There was also a barter system in operation. We swapped and exchanged books while he fried and packed mouth-watering sweets.

Holi in the hills had a magical quality about it. From Amel Ekadeshi for full five days musical gatherings were held in prosperous houses, where the women met in the afternoon and the meal is congregated in the evening. Thick carpets from Tibet were laid out with white sheets and colourful bolsters. Hookahs and aromatic tobacco came from Asghar Ali Mohammadh in Lucknow. Men sang in unison with perfect taal and sur. Then shining brass tumblers of ginger tea along with fresh hot gujias and potato gutka was served. Danu-da was the tabla player on all these occasions. The harmonium was always with Kantivallabhji of Bishtakula. Although they lacked formal training in music these men were innately gifted. They sang the traditional Kumaoni holi songs based on classical ragas, but they sang from their hearts. In the afternoons the women sang, danced and made merry. The songs they sang were about Radha and Krishna, or the holi scenes between Lord Rama and the people of Ayodhya.

'Holika Dehan', the bonfire on Holi eve was a sort of community spring cleaning. All kinds of broken furniture, old exercise books and other discarded things were all confined to the flames. On Holi day, my grandfather would insist that all the young girls of the family be sent to an empty cottage built on the periphery of Almora town. We used to protest a lot because the boys were allowed to join in the celebrations. Years later I now realise that it was socially useful to have one special day when people were allowed all manner of licence to

do as they pleased. They could dance on the streets, sing bawdy songs, do away with all repression

Even the strict caste distinctions were temporarily suspended. The licentious acts had to be screened from the tender eyes of young girls, which was why my conservative and traditional grandfather sent us far away to the safety of that empty cottage. It was only towards the evening when the procession of 'Holiyas' came to each household to bless the householder at his doorstep that we were allowed to come home. The women in the house played games and mimicked the menfolk, highlighting their idiosyncrasies or playing at charades. This made for much fun and mirthfulness. We learnt much from these festivals.

Nowadays this demand for 'space' around oneself has made for much selfishness and even more egotism. There is a 'Laxman Rekha' around everyone which makes communication its first victim and once this communication breaks down, many misunderstandings arise. There is a unique joy in being part of a large happy family. Take the example of my younger sister's mother-in-law. She was a very large hearted woman. Countless people enjoyed her hospitality, came from far and near, even lived in her house to take advantage of the educational facilities in Almora. She even insisted upon educating her domestic servants, and one of them is now a prosperous lawyer.

'How do you manage such a household?' I had once asked her. She replied that if one fed the same food to everyone, if many people would eat out of the same kitchen and one made no distinction between one's own progeny and outsiders then the Lord Almighty himself comes and takes charge of the stores. She said that she had five sons, four daughters and innumerable adoptive

sons who came to Almora for their schooling. She gave them whatever was cooked, and after dinner, when they all came with their 'katories' for milk she used the same 'Kalchi' for serving everyone including the servants. The milk never fell short.

All the Brahmin households of those days had a lot of orthodox restrictions regarding food. Only one person, usually a lady of the house, could enter the actual cooking area. There was a low six-inch wall around the main hearth. The person who was cooking could enter it wearing only one piece of cloth (washed and cleaned) and then he or she had to sit there till all the household had been fed. Only then could they eat and come out. This is the only way lentils and rice could be eaten. In large households where huge utensils had to be held, two ladies could enter simultaneously. Only very prosperous homes kept cooks who had to be the same level and status of Brahmins to be able to handle everyday cooking. In these households no one ever kept count of how many people came and ate. It was considered the right of the village folk to stay with the household in Almora town if he came for some work. They brought their bedding and lay down in the outer rooms whenever they pleased belching out their profuse thanks to the magnificence of the master of the house.

'Shradh' fortnight was another of those rites which was observed with great reverence. Each house had their own date when the Pandit and various nephews and relatives were invited to partake of the ritual feast. The five-grained lentils tempered with hing, chives and clarified butter, huge vadas of black gram with a hole in the centre, green purees and kheer brimming with dried fruits were prepared with great solemnity. Those special dishes to which the deceased had been partial were cooked with great care

and reverence. Only the Hindus seem to know how to celebrate even death. We children used to wait for hours for these delicacies because on this day the food is served first to the dead, then to the crows, and then the Brahmins invited to the feast. It is only after this that the women and children are served the food. After this we had to deliver *prashad* wrapped in fig leaves to the houses of our friends and relatives.

The front portico of our home in Almora opened on to the main road where many marriage processions could be sighted during the marriage season. Our rear wall in contrast overlooked the small lane which wound down the hill to the cremation ghats near the rivulet below. There was no season for death. In a Kumaoni household bodies were cremated at the very earliest, whatever the circumstances. Day or night, rain or hail, bodies never lay in state or awaited the arrival of distant relatives. The after-funeral rituals started immediately.

All through our childhood we would be faced with the choice of whether to run to the front door to watch the merry wedding procession or jump to the rear wall to witness death passing by. An old aunt who lived in our house could even distinguish the caste marking of the dead.

Death is a serious business in Kumaon, and if the deceased were within the circle of kinship then no bathing, washing or cleaning could be undertaken for the next twelve days. The food would be cooked without any turmeric or seasoning. *Pooja* was not performed and the family was rendered untouchable for the entire mourning period. Only after the twelfth day were you back in the community.

My maternal grandfather was a medical doctor at the turn of the century. Although he had a transferable job

in the United Provinces he ultimately settled down in Lucknow. He was the family physician to the Rajas of Daulatpur, Bahampur and Vijayanagram. Dr Haridutt Pant of Jeevanpur Almora was an eminent doctor of those days. He had a small family, just two sons and two daughters. My maternal grandmother was an outspoken and fearless woman. She was kind hearted and generous but rather dominating. She was sharp featured and very fair. I remember her as a fair, white haired lady dressed in starched white mill sarees and a Lucknawi kurta. She used jasmine perfumed hair oil which I thought smelt wonderful.

The secret of jasmine travelled with her from room to room. Her only daughter-in-law died quite young and so she brought up her three grandchildren as her own—she was a very capable housewife and had provided shelter and guidance to innumerable young boys from the hills who came to stay in her huge house in Lucknow.

I did not ever see my grandfather but someone had sculpted a small bust in his likeness. This little statuette and a sepia photograph in the sitting room in Lucknow is all that I can recall of him. He was very tall, he sported a french beard and a pince-nez, in the manner of the Europeans. After the Lucknow house was sold off, this photograph resurfaced in my mother's room.

The old Lucknow house is still in existence, the ownership has probably changed many times though two huge marble lions at the entry gate and the marble plaque with the name Dr Hari Datt Pant are still intact.

It is not commonly known that the Mahila College in Lucknow came to existence through the efforts of Dr Pant and his friend, the litterateur, Romesh Dutt. There was a rich merchant of Lucknow called Puttupal whom

my grandfather had cured of some terrible ailment. In gratitude he offered my grandfather a bag of gold coins. Dr Pant refused the money but persuaded him to fund the school.

My grandfather also persuaded the Raja of Balarampur to establish the Bahampur Hospital. Dr Pant was the only physician in the hospital and the sole attendant, nurse, and all purpose help was a woman called Mahdei. Mahdei was so disgusted with hospital work that she came over to help in the house. She stayed on with my mother till she died. She was a very strong and ugly woman who became a member of our household. After my mother was married, she looked after us when we were children and though she was partial to the boys she tended us well and also imparted some of her sturdy folk wisdom to us.

My mother once told me a comical story about Mahdei. When the two of them first came to Almora, my mother had a liver abscess which had been operated upon by my grandfather. Someone spread a rumour that she had a bad leg, so instead of seeing the young brides face, ladies of Almora were lifting up her skirts to see if she had two normal feet. Mahadei was intrigued but being from the girl's side could not say much. However, she lifted up the ghagras of the ladies and upon their objections said that she had heard that hill women had tails and so she was just checking!

By and by my mother learnt the Kumaoni ways as practiced in Almora. My paternal grandfather himself taught her Sanskrit and then opened out his library to her. He was a teacher of astrology in Benaras and well versed in the Vedas and classical traditions. In those days it was usual for the men to venture to the plains in search of a living. The women and the young children stayed

back in their family homes in the hills. The hill people were wary of taking their families with them because of the heat, dust and epidemics common in the plains. My paternal grandmother ran the house with an iron hand. My mother being the only daughter-in-law was loved and cherished but the discipline was never broken.

I have seen a photograph of my paternal grandmother with her husband and she seems good looking, sitting erect with a lot of style, a composed face and an intelligent demeanour. A distant aunt once told me that she was known as Vittori or Queen Victoria among our relatives. When she fell very ill my grandfather took her to Benaras to the famous Tryambak Shastri, an Ayurvedic physician who could feel the pulse and predict whether the illness was curable or not. Tryambak Shastri saw my grandmother and declared that she would live for just five days. Upon hearing this she expressed a desire to be taken to the Baikunth hut near the Ganges, because if one breathes one's last near the Ganges, Lord Shiva himself gives absolution. She died with her head on her husband's lap with her two sons beside her and her feet touching the holy water of the Ganges.

She may have been a little short tempered but she was kind and hospitable. A stream of relatives, nephews and cousins came and stayed in the house. She supervised their ceremonies and even sometimes arranged for their weddings. If they chose to stay on in Almora, she had houses made for them on her own property. She had studied quite a lot with her husband and wrote beautifully. I had a page of her handwriting which is now with my daughter Mrinal. My mother told us that after her last rites, on the twelfth day, many married women came to collect her bangles because she was a true *Sati*.

Like his father before him, my father too took up a position as a teacher in a princely household. Unlike his father he took my mother along with him, and even the rest of the family. We would spend half the year travelling across the length and width of the country. We always returned to Almora for the summer and then back to wherever my father was for the winter months. I was the fourth child in the family and was born on Vijaydashmi day in 1924 in Rajkot where my father was teaching in a college for the local princes. The principal of the college was the famous British educationist Mr. Turner.

Although we did not initially have a formal education, we learnt a lot in the course of these travels around the country. We learnt above all to tolerate and appreciate the manners and customs of different people in different parts of India. As children we were quick to pick up dialects and languages wherever we went.

My mother became quite proficient in the local dialects and learnt to read and write Gujarati. We had many eminent Gujarati litterateurs visiting our home. It was all quite unconventional for those times, I vaguely remember drinks being served at parties, and on one occasion even fish. This was all very shocking in view of my grandfather's extreme orthodoxy. Perhaps it was a sort of contrary reaction on the part of my grandfather!

Our family lived in Rajkot for nearly fourteen years. Because of our long stay in Kutch we could all converse fluently in Gujarati and ate a lot of local dishes. Even though our servants and helpers were all from Almora the food was Gujarati. The only habit we did not adopt was eating before sunset in the Jain manner.

Then my father moved on to Rampur State in the United Provinces where he was appointed Home Minister. He was perhaps the first Hindu Minister in what was in

essence a Muslim State. I believe the beautiful Mustafa Lodge where we lived is still standing amidst its lost grandeur. We had a big yard covered by a Henna hedge. We had a wonderful time there. We lived in great comfort and with our share of princely airs and graces. We had a large retinue of servants and a wide circle of friends. My mother being learned and sophisticated moved among the begums of the household where she had a busy social life. She would attend music and dance performances at weddings and births. There were two kitchens operating in our house, one non-vegetarian and the other my mother's orthodox vegetarian one. Although her lifestyle was modern for those days, she adhered to all the traditional taboos and injunctions concerning food, so as not to offend my old-fashioned grandfather.

The Almora Brahmins were after all extremely orthodox in their attitudes. Even my forward-looking father had to perform penance to the *Biradari* and his community after his visit to England which violated the sacred code.

Around this time my grandfather Pandit Hariram Pande took retirement from the Benaras University, for his failing eyesight was interfering with the rigours of teaching. He decided that his grandchildren now needed a sense of stability and an atmosphere of formal learning. My eldest sister had been married off at a very young age. Her unhappy experiences with her new family and household and the trauma of a difficult childbirth had a bitter impact on the rest of the family. It was decided that we remaining sisters should study and be given time to mature before we too were married off. My sister studied under the tutelage of my grandfather and his beloved disciple, old Purohitjee. My brother was sent to a governess in Nainital called Miss Mumford who provided tuition to select students.

Life in Almora was very different from our previous lifestyle. We were brought up in an atmosphere of pampered comfort. There was a constant round of picnics, expeditions, horse-riding, parties and fun. After that indolent life, our new existence in Almora was Spartan in the extreme. We were expected to rise early, well before sunrise. The day began with a dose of *Triphala*, a bitter Ayurvedic medicine which I detested. A glass of cold water, and then a long walk with the ever vigilant Lohaniji, followed by a sparse breakfast of fruit and boiled chick-peas. Pandit Gangaduttji arrived to instruct us in Sanskrit. Hindi and English were taught to us by my grandfather himself. And he was tough to please as he was an idealist grandfather and a perfectionist and hence very difficult to please.

My grandfather's failing eye sight gave his face a peaceful stillness. He looked like a sage with his long white beard. All thirty-two of his teeth were still intact at the ripe old age of eighty seven. He had a prodigious memory and made us learn by rote. He would send us to the library to search for the relevant books, and then we had to read out aloud to him. Under his guidance and that of Pandit Gangaduttji, my sister became a scholar of Sanskrit at a very young age.

Many people of talent came to witness a sort of cultural renaissance, and flourished as a fashionable health era. There were several artistes, poets, painters and intellectuals who made their summer residence in Almora. Pandit Rabindranath Tagore used to come and stay near our house. Professor Adhikari of Shantiniketan became a friend of my grandfather's and often visited him to indulge in dialogue and debate. My grandfather was quite taken by Gurudev's experiment in non-formal education. On one occasion he accompanied Professor Adhikari's

family back to Calcutta after their summer sojourn. He was very impressed with what he saw there and made the decision to send me, my elder sister, aunt and elder brother Tribhuvan to study at Shantiniketan. His only condition was that we were to stay with Gurudev in his own accommodation until we became used to ashram life. I was all of twelve years old when we undertook the long journey from Almora to Calcutta.

Our exposure to the length and breadth of North India and our rigorous training in languages and Sanskrit helped us to adjust sooner than expected. We had no fear of ever being shown up by the other city bred youngsters. We had a solid foundation and it was easier to build on that. My elder sister Jayanti did exceptionally well. For some reason we had to appear for our formal examinations in Shillong. Ultimately we graduated from Vidyasagar College, Calcutta University.

I spent about nine years at Shantiniketan. After graduation, my sister stayed there. The pattern of our lives remained the same, we went home once a year to Almora or wherever my parents were situated. In the meantime my father's elder brother-in-law and sister both died unexpectedly. Their two children Sunil and Madhuri came to live with us and became part of our family forever. My second sister's career at Shantiniketan followed a brilliant course. She became an authority on ancient Chinese, Sanskrit and Kharoshti. Buddhist monks and scholars came to consult her for help with their translation work. She also decided never to marry as she was adversely affected by the tragedy of my elder sister. My elder brother Tribhuvan was very good looking and a great raconteur in the family tradition. He could talk his way through any situation. He was the original model for many of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's sketches in the

'Arjun' series. He was also the model for several of his sculptures.

My father went all the way to Bangalore at the invitation of the Prince of Mysore. He was to be crowned and had invited my father to be his Diwan. Unfortunately the prince died of a massive heart attack. It was a pathetic situation. There we were, my mother, father and eight children with nowhere to go. Fortunately my father encountered his old friend Mr. Heary. He was the War Secretary and he took my father on as his assistant. These two years in Bangalore were glorious fun. Our entire family picked up a working knowledge of Kannada (we were already proficient in Bengali which was like our mother tongue). The three of us were still in Shantiniketan but we visited Bangalore during our vacations. We lived extravagantly. Ours was a large family, and we had a menage of cooks, maid servants and bearers. We girls observed that the scores of gold bangles on mother's arms were mysteriously disappearing. Children then did not dare question these things. However, when we broached the subject she told us that in the warm humid weather of Bangalore these metallic things got over-heated, so she had decided to stop wearing them. She brought us up uncomplainingly, and fulfilled all our needs and necessities. We were not very demanding children. We used to stay in a bungalow at Shasadi Puram. Recently when I went to Bangalore I managed to locate the house: only, it looks so old and dilapidated now.

My father died suddenly. A veritable storm broke over our heads. It was evident that we had been living beyond our means for quite some time. A secretary's salary has its limitations but our household had run on princely lines, with a fine disregard for costs. It was Girija Maushi, our mother's friend, who came to our rescue. She literally

thrust some money into my mother's hands, a full two thousand rupees. Such love and trust restored our faith in human nature, for our own relatives had ignored my mother's plea for help. Our local grocer Venkatachalam left five thousand rupees with us for immediate expenses. Our daily groceries came from his house and for the past few months he had not even been paid. He assured my mother that she could always pay him back when my brother Tribhuvan began earning. He knew full well that once we moved away a thousand miles we might never return to Bangalore. Thus we left Bangalore sad and disheartened but nevertheless moved by the kindness of our southern acquaintances and their generosity. I can never forget the trust and faith they showed us, just as I can never forget my mother's fortitude in bringing us all up, in getting us educated and married, and settled; that house in Almora was always our safety net.

Soon afterwards my brother Tribhuwan got employment as secretary to the Raja of Orchha who had been my father's student. As children we all pulled his leg constantly. I got married in Orchha. It was a grand affair, befitting a princess. My husband, Sukh Dev Pant, was a very simple school teacher posted in the Government Inter College at Almora. I was not very proficient at housework, having spent all my childhood and youth in pursuit of an education. Somehow the household ran on its own but I was often quite confused with demands like grinding daals for vadas or making alpana, or grinding besan in the chakki. That is when old Lohaniji would come to my aid. 'Never mind, never say no, just do it; you have married a wonderful person and he will support you through thick and thin,' he would tell me.

And that is how it was, by and by I learnt everything and still managed to find time for my own reading and

writing. My husband was my greatest friend and critic. He helped me hone and sharpen my skills. He was a very honest person and there was no deception in our relationship. He was also very realistic and down to earth. In many ways, I was shaped by my feudal upbringing. He corrected my extravagances and gave me the right perspective and gradually I learned to live within my means. He taught me never to idle my time away. We had four children to rear, I had to look to their needs, education, upbringing and extra curricular activities, and also tend my own budding career as a writer. All this kept me busy with no time for idle gossip and nagging. My husband let me have my space and I loved and admired him to distraction. He died twenty four years ago and I thought that the world had ended. But we are all strong women from the hills, our lives get meaning and our ideas get impetus in adversity. My three daughters had been married by then and my son Mukesh was in his final year in Engineering College. We supported each other through these tough times and I got deep into serious writing. The atmosphere for writers, publishers and readers had changed and my writing helped me overcome the loneliness of being left all alone. By now I have written thirty four books, besides articles in journals, radio talks and interviews. I received the Hazari Prasad Dwiwedi Award and another very important and prestigious award for Hindi Writers: the Premchand Award. The government has appreciated my work and honoured me with the *Padma Shri*. This year I was very honoured by the Maharashtra Government for conferring the Mahashri Award for literature on me, and the poet, Harivansh Rai Bachhan. I am happy that my children too have done well by themselves with whatever knowledge, discipline and family values I could instill in them.

Any account of my life is incomplete without mention of a strange and unforgettable encounter that perhaps changed my life. It was many years ago in Almora that a strange Vaishnavi lady appeared like a dishevelled comet in front of our house. My sister and I happened to be alone at home that day. Suddenly we heard someone shout 'Jai Baba Gorakhnath' in a loud rasping voice in our front courtyard. There was this huge apparition who had planted her iron chimta in the middle of the garden. 'Today I shall eat here' she declared. Then she sat down, spreading her thick hairy legs, in an unconcerned way. We were scared and also puzzled about whether we were confronted by a man or a woman. The vision before us had eyes like burning embers, huge giantlike shoulders and enormously strong arms. A complexion like burnished copper with strange beads and Rudraksh necklaces strung with bleached white bones. Our fear was so palpable and our doubts so transparent that she took off her long kurta to reassure us. She was a woman alright. A woman of fearsome and gargantuan proportions! She barked at us to get her some besan rice and curds. 'Mai will eat Kadhi and rice' she declared, referring to herself in the third person. We were both simply too stunned to react.

We had heard rumours around Almora that a malevolent *Bhairavi* had visited some households, she was bad-tempered and quick with her curses. Those who refused to listen to her had to suffer sudden illness and other hardships. We obediently brought her all that she had demanded. She had a magnetic presence. We were so fascinated that we stayed on to stare at her. She cooked and ate the Kadhi with great gusto. After the meal she looked suddenly more human. The transformation was magical. She positively glowed. We touched her feet and she pulled out her tongs. 'Do you want to ask for

anything?' she asked. Her voice rang through the afternoon air like a bell. We were both quite tongue-tied. We did ask her for a boon, now so many years later I do not remember what. I recollect that when she was unable to get up I had extended my right hand to give her support. This and the blessing she gave us on our forehead kept us going through all our adversities. Many are the times when I have felt down and out and unable to cope. At such times the image of her sheer new strength comes to me. I can almost visualise a hand pulling me out of my troubles and I do overcome them. My right hand was blessed too, and I sincerely feel that she unlocked my latent powers. The fact that I can write and articulate my thoughts I attribute to this. Even today, I am really grateful for her benediction.